

Engaging Race Issues with Colleagues:

Strengthening our Professional Communities through Everyday Inquiry

By Mica Pollock

Some educators feel forced to attend professional development on race issues. They see it as stand-alone diversity training and many consider these issues external to just being a good teacher. Strategic inquiry into how best to teach in a diverse society filled with inequality is central, however, because it engages us in examining how our



everyday actions have consequences for young people's opportunities to learn and pursue their full potential. Discussing everyday antiracism is simply extending a conversation about "good teaching" to include conversation about which actions best assist young people in a diverse society that still contains race-class inequalities and harmful ideas about racial-ethnic and class-based "types" of people. This is the real world we live in; becoming more aware of this context and learning how to teach in it is central to good teaching.

In 2008, I published an edited volume, *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*, which is designed to serve as an inquiry tool for educators. In my professional development workshops across the country, I encourage educators to use tools like *Everyday Antiracism* as springboards to inquire collectively into the race aspects of their everyday work. This book is matter-of-fact about the inquiry it proposes: 70 colleagues offer prompts for educators to evaluate, together,

whether their everyday acts proactively counteract: 1) racial and race-class inequality of opportunity and outcome, and 2) false, harmful ideas about "types of people" that are still pervasive in American society (stereotypes, misinformation, and damaging concepts about racial or ethnic "groups"). Basically, we ask educators to ask, routinely, which everyday acts serve students best. Yet when such inquiry is

race-related, it is always a challenging task, in part because these conversations relate not only to teacher-student-family relationships and to students' opportunities to learn, but also to educators' opportunities to construct productive relationships within their professional communities.

In this article, I offer suggestions for engaging colleagues in conversations about the issues of race, diversity, culture, and inequality that routinely arise in schools and classrooms. One key suggestion comes directly from *Everyday Antiracism*: I recommend that in discussions of real-world situations, educators deliberately search for gold nuggets – clear, pithy, and helpful ideas – at three levels: *principles*, or big, memorable ideas about optimal teaching and the pursuit of student success; *strategies*, or general actions any educator might try to support students in particular ways; and "*try tomorrows*," or specific solutions one could actually imagine trying tomorrow in one's own classroom or school¹. Identifying key points at these three levels fosters deeper learning and provides multiple points for connection with colleagues who are discussing how to improve their service to students.

Defining Antiracism

The authors included in *Everyday Antiracism* collectively define racism as any act that, even unwittingly, tolerates, accepts, or reinforces racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive; allows racial inequalities in opportunity (in schools or in the world) as if they are normal and acceptable; or treats people of color as less worthy or less complex than "white" people. Everyday antiracism, then, involves educators in ex

¹ For example, in Chang's and Conrad's chapter "Following Children's Leads in Conversations about Race" in *Everyday Antiracism* (Pollock, 2008), the discussion questions for "Principles" asks: "What facilitates or hinders dialogue about race between adults and children?"; for "Strategies": "As educators seek to follow children's leads in conversations about race, when, if ever, should educators simply tell students that their ideas about race are wrong?"; and for "Try Tomorrow": "Can you think of an example in your teaching when a student asked you a question or made a comment about race? How did you respond, and where did the conversation go? How might you have responded differently using the child-centered guidelines suggested by the authors?" (p. 38).

aming and evaluating the positive and negative consequences of specific daily interactions as they relate to race, diversity, and equality. We advocate examination of interactions as specific as “how we talk with our students and discipline them; the activities we set up for them to do; the ways we frame and discuss communities in our curriculum; and the ways we assign students to groups, grade their papers, interact with their parents, and envision their futures.” (Pollock, 2008, xviii). This professional inquiry involves continually assessing students’ opportunities, becoming aware of socially programmed beliefs and values, and developing a shared knowledge base and commitment to meaningful, ongoing discussions about race.

Suggestion #1: Examine four core principles of everyday antiracism in education.

Everyday Antiracism offers four core principles and encourages educators to pinpoint more principles of their own:

1. *Reject false notions of human difference.* Educators need to explicitly counteract stereotypes, question and unlearn false ideas about “types” of human beings, and learn that “racial groups” are social realities, not biological ones.
2. *Acknowledge lived experiences shaped along racial/ethnic lines.* Educators need to consider how people live lives and build identities as members of (multiple) groups, including racial-ethnic groups, even as we are all complex individuals. In particular, we experience inequality along lines of race/ethnicity as well as class. Conversely, positive experiences of group membership can also fuel students’ sense of identity and purpose.
3. *Learn from diversity in human experience.* Educators need to inform themselves continually about students’ and communities’ actual experiences, rather than proceeding with misinformation. Educators also need to remember that all communities have wisdom and skill sets to offer the educational process. In curriculum and programming, we also need to engage students in inquiry into diverse human experiences.
4. *Challenge systems of racial inequality.* Inequalities of opportunity may be evidenced in students’ unequal access to gifted and talented programs or Advanced Placement courses; unequal outcomes may be evidenced in achievement “gaps” or varied graduation rates for different subgroups of students. Every day, educators can consider and challenge inequalities

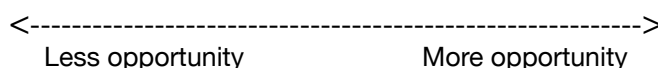
of opportunity and outcome in our schools, communities, nation, and world.

It’s about becoming better equipped to serve students successfully in a world both diverse and riddled with inequalities of opportunity, power, and outcome.

Inquiry into these four principles can help us to avoid problems - for ourselves and our students alike. Many educators ask why they should bother walking into the minefields of discussing racialized aspects of their work with colleagues. They fear that it can get teachers into trouble; they can get burned and it is exhausting. When we don’t talk about these issues, however, we often amplify problems rather than side-step them. For example, in the California high school where I taught, educators did not talk publicly about racial patterns in achievement, discipline, special education placement, or student-teacher interactions. I came to call this silence *colormuteness*, because educators were thinking, seeing, and talking about race issues in private (Pollock, 2004). Our public silence not only meant that we let many problematic patterns for students just stand as normal; it also meant that we never shared ways of assisting or motivating students, deepening curriculum, undoing “achievement gaps,” or improving relationships between teachers and students or teachers and families. So, while many thought being “colorblind” would be more helpful, we actually made our own professional lives much harder by not talking about issues that were deeply affecting our students’ services and learning. Since that time, both teachers of color and white teachers have told me that the inability to talk with their colleagues about these issues have prompted many to leave their schools – and even the profession.

Suggestion #2: Consider everyday decisions in terms of moving students toward or away from opportunity and success.

I propose a simple continuum as a core inquiry tool that is usable far beyond race-related inquiry:



Colleagues can collaboratively consider an everyday classroom act and ask: Does this act move the child toward or

away from some necessary opportunity or educational experience? Why? Since in a diverse world there is no one definition of “necessary opportunity,” the continuum invites collegial analysis of which acts are best for students. Which literature should we teach? How should we teach it? Does this act of discipline help or harm? Does the way we make referrals to the “gifted and talented” program move children toward or away from necessary opportunity? How can children, their families, and the communities we engage as educators be treated as equally worthy of respect? Which actions actually “level the playing field”? How do we counteract dynamics where some “types of people” are falsely judged to be innately superior to others? Which false ideas in our minds get in the way of optimal service? Tough stuff, but these are the questions at the root of professional development “for diversity.” It’s about becoming better equipped to serve students successfully in a world both diverse and riddled with inequalities of opportunity, power, and outcome. Ideally, we ask questions about optimal student service together in ongoing partnership with our students, their families, and other community partners. We start by asking questions together as educator colleagues.



Suggestion #3: Uncover the socially programmed beliefs and values that make us take particular actions toward children.

It is not about a hunt for “good” people who are better than others or “bad” people who are willfully setting forth to harm children of color. Many acts taken in educational settings harm children of color or those who lack privilege and value some children over others in racial (and class) terms, without educators ever intending to do this. We carry with us many stereotypical ideas about people without realizing it. And many of us simply let disparities stand because we come to find them both “normal” and overwhelming to change. So let us skip arguments about who is a “good” or “bad” person; let’s consider instead: What is an optimal act to support young people’s opportunities and which “beliefs” stand in the way of optimal acts?

Suggestion #4: Explore the tensions in being “antiracist.”

Many educators wonder if it is antiracist to be “colorblind” or, conversely, if it is antiracist to be “race conscious.” It is important to point out that in a world that has contained “racial” inequality and racist ideas for almost 600 years, today’s anti-

racist educators need to be *both*. That is, antiracist educators must treat all people as human beings and complex individuals, rather than racial group members, and at the same time, recognize people’s real experiences as racial/ethnic group members in order to counteract actual racial inequality. So, the math teacher with the impulse to simply see her students as “individual math students learning math” is having an antiracist impulse. Individualized attention is crucial. If the teacher refuses, however, to also engage the child’s experience in a racialized world, she will be doing him a disservice because she will be missing ways to engage and assist him in that context and that experience. Black students learning math in a society that expects less of black students’ brains are having a different experience battling stereotypes than are white students learning math. All students need teachers to actively work against the still-pervasive lie that “some races are smarter than others” or “some groups are more equipped to become mathematicians than others.” Students also belong to communities that, if tapped and welcomed into schools, can buoy students’ motivation, pride, positive self-identity, and sense of community purpose. At the same time, students belong to multiple communities that shape their lives. Analysis

of each student’s context and needs, at an individual level, can be the most powerful assistance of all. Ultimately, educators must grapple with the tensions between seeing individual students as complex human beings while also engaging their experiences within racialized groups in a racialized society.

Suggestion #5: Make antiracist conversations an expected, ongoing aspect of discourse in professional communities.

Our students are already being affected by a racialized society and context, whether teachers want this to be the case or not. This is true of educators, as well. As we interact daily with our students and our content, we need to discuss what it means to teach well in a diverse and inequitable world. Research shows that in our society, stereotypical ideas about which “groups” are “smart,” “gifted,” “model minorities,” “motivated,” or “AP material” affect how we think about our students and how our students think about themselves and about others (see, for example, *Everyday Antiracism* articles by Maria Ong, Carolyn Tyson, and Beth Rubin). As students see racial and race-class achievement patterns forming around them - in advanced placement classes, gifted referrals, or graduation events - they start to imagine that particular opportunities are reserved for particular “types” of kids. As young people are being sorted into groups and classrooms, they start to sort

themselves. Students are becoming motivated or demotivated and further skilled or underskilled every day as they interact with educators, parents, and peers. They are developing views about “types of people” with every television show they watch or book they read. For all of these reasons, every moment in school is an opportunity to pursue not just more successful kids, but a more successful society in which students pursue their full human potential and believe in the full human potential of others. We need such inspiring visions to keep doing our work.

Suggestion #6: Confirm for educators that their everyday acts can make a significant difference.

Often, an underlying tension driving educators’ lack of engagement with race/inequality issues in schools is that they are unsure whether their everyday activity can assist students when patterns of unequal opportunity or outcome seem so pervasive. It is overwhelming, especially in an era when teachers confront so much inequality and when we repeatedly display charts of various “gaps” – achievement, socio-economic, access to resources - and ask teachers to fix them. Teachers are understandably confused about whether their individual, everyday activity can really make a dent in larger, socially-embedded structures. The appropriate response is that teachers need to consider the wider dynamics of inequality that are historic and stretch beyond schools and they need to pinpoint specific ways they can counteract such massive inequalities -- as individuals, and collectively as colleagues¹. Achievement patterns are not just created by educators, but educators also *contribute* to these patterns, as educators react to students, students react to educators, and parents and students and educators react to one another,

all in a policy context where some students end up with far more of the resources they need than others.² Ask educators to consider how everyday acts had serious consequences for their own pathways or how a single act of discipline, a teacher’s reaction to a student’s speech, or an everyday reaction to parents might deeply affect students’ attachment to school. A moment assigning one student in or out of a “gifted and talented” program can be an act with massive consequences.

¹ I discuss this issue in “From Shallow to Deep” in *Because of Race* (2008) and in my blog schoolracetalk.org in a post titled, “Emphasizing Educators’ Everyday Actions.”

² In my “Emphasizing. . .” blog post noted above, I discuss Rebecca Blank’s work on “cumulative advantage and disadvantage.” It is the best model I’ve seen thus far for conveying the idea that educators’ actions contribute to children’s outcomes, even given race-class inequalities in health care, housing, and our country’s history.

Simultaneously, consider how positive, everyday interactions can help seal students’ relationships to school, seal students’ self-confidence, and seal a productive relationship between a parent and a teacher. Every moment really is an opportunity to shape a child’s fate.

Suggestion #7: Develop a shared knowledge base to support discussion of race issues in schools.

We cannot assume that we are entering these professional conversations with the same knowledge base or even an adequate knowledge base. Race categories, for example, have no valid genetic basis. The “traits” we use to categorize people “racially” (skin, noses, eyes, hair) are simply too small a part of our genetic makeup, and these traits don’t map easily onto single “groups,” either. Over the past 600 years, laws, science, and everyday practice made American race categories and racial inequality *social* truths even while race categories are not *biological* truths. If they were simple, valid biological categories, how could someone labeled “white” in Brazil come to America and be labeled either “Latino” or “black”? Through *law* (think Jim Crow), race categories in the United States were made central to who received which opportunities and who then amassed wealth; science supported racist ideas about “types of people” to justify the system of inequality that was created. False notions that some “races” are “smarter” than others still

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(Pollock, 2008, xviii).

persist in our society and remain incredibly consequential for schooling. This is what we are working to counteract when we tell ourselves to “have high expectations.” Since most Americans don’t understand this context, it is important to share and discuss useful resources to begin to build a common knowledge base. These include the American Anthropological Association’s website, *Understanding Race* (www.understandingrace.org), the PBS film *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm), a great book for teachers called *How Real is Race?* (Mukhopadhyay, Moses, & Henze, 2007), and a public handout available on my blog, schoolracetalk.org, (scroll down to the heading “Handout for your colleagues and students: How Real is Race?”).



Conclusion

Discussing race, diversity, and equality in schools may be challenging at times, yet it is an essential activity in professional communities that are committed to improving student opportunity and outcomes. Toward this end, it is helpful to be explicit about naming and considering some key dynamics that might undermine collegial conversations about race issues in schools. For example, people will likely express defensiveness about any claims of harmful action; they may argue that their “everyday acts don’t matter”; they may debate who is to blame for students’ outcomes. Facilitators can lessen colleagues’ defensiveness by framing all of these reactions as dynamics to expect. Facilitators can also directly acknowledge teachers’ possible preference for colorblindness and state explicitly that antiracism requires both emphasizing individuality

and engaging the actual racialized world in which we live. Finally, it is essential to make clear that inquiry into race issues in teaching is not taking time away from good teaching; it is just part of teaching as well as we can.

Mica Pollock, an anthropologist of education, studies how people discuss and address everyday issues of diversity and opportunity in education. Her books (*Colormute*, 2004; *Because of Race*, 2008; and the edited volume *Everyday Antiracism*, 2008) invite educators to consider optimal ways of addressing race issues in their daily work. She is currently designing a virtual Center for Public Knowledge on Educational Opportunity and engaging educators and community members of all ages in the *OneVille Project* in Somerville, MA, which is examining whether social media can support community inquiry into everyday actions that bolster every child’s success.

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